

DEMOGRAPHIC CRISIS, MINORITY INTEGRATION AND STRATEGIC DEMOGRAPHY: THE CASE OF TURKS IN BULGARIA - 20.04.2026

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Abstract:

This study aims to examine the political and social integration of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria in the context of serious demographic crises that started to unfold especially after 1990s and continued to grow afterwards in the Western European countries as much as it severely undermines the demographic stability of the Balkan countries, particularly Bulgaria. The scope of this examination will focus on the process following the Treaty of Berlin (1878), and the social and political status of the Turkish minority in the newly founded Bulgarian nation state regarding identity issues which has worsened over time owing to the assimilation policies implemented during the communist regime in Bulgaria and the forced migration of the Turkish minority as a result of the attempts of the Bulgarian state to establish a homogenous Bulgarian society. Furthermore, the democratization process that took place after the fall of the communist regime in Bulgaria and the reframing of the identity and minority issues and rights in Bulgaria in relation to the integration campaign of Bulgaria into the European Union will be analysed within a broader context of demographic problems and the recently aggravating demographic stability of Bulgaria. Severe demographic problems such as domestic and external migration, declining fertility rates, and overall population decline, all of which have emerged as major topics of national debate recently. The study argues that policies aimed at ethnic homogenization weakened Bulgarias demographic structure in the long term.

And as a remedy, it suggests that the political integration and social participation of the Turkish minority may offer an important potential asset for the countrys demographic and socio-economic sustainability. Accordingly, the paper contends that the Turkish minority in Bulgaria should be evaluated not only within the frameworks of nation-state formation, minority issues, and democratization processes, but also in terms of demographic sustainability and regional stability.

1. INTRODUCTION

In Ottoman history, Bulgaria represented far more than a frontier region during the early period of Ottoman expansion; it later emerged as one of the regions with the highest density of Turkish population throughout the Ottoman period. For this reason, the Turkish population in Bulgaria holds an important yet problematic place in the Bulgarian history. However, we will specifically concentrate our attention on the late 19th century and onwards in the matter of population politics and the Turkish minority of Bulgaria after the Treaty of Berlin (1878); therefore, before going deeper into our main topic a summary of the history of Turkish dominion and the Turkish demographic presence will be provided. The consecutive military victories against the Balkan principalities and feudal lords brought Bulgaria, Macedonia and the southern parts of Serbia under the Ottoman control. [1] Since Bulgarian territories held geopolitical strategic value for the Ottoman Empire to push towards the Central Europe and the rest of the Balkans the Ottoman governors decided to establish Bulgaria as a base for further conquests. Consequently, following the Ottoman conquest of the region in the 14th century, the Turkish presence in the region intensified through either forced or encouraged migrations of Turkish Muslim population from Anatolia to Bulgarian territories. To be more precise, the Ottoman administration thought of consolidating their hegemony by increasing the Turkish-Muslim population in the region not only as a means of establishing a military stronghold but also as a way to increase the agricultural production.[2] As envisaged by Ottoman administrators, the political and economic integration of the region would gradually be achieved. Owing to the decisive military victories against the Christian European coalition attacks on the Ottoman territories in the region, the Turkish demographic presence was reinforced by the undisputed Ottoman hegemony in the region. As a result, the demographic structure of the Bulgarian territories, especially in the urban sites, changed in favour of the Turks.[3] It should be noted that the southern parts of Bulgaria and the northeastern regions were the places where the Turkish population was concentrated the most. For instance, the city of Varna as a port city, located in the northeastern Bulgaria, with much commercial potential was mostly inhabited by Turks according to the Ottoman registers in the mid-19th century. [4] Some historically important cities like Plovdiv (Filibe), Ruse (Rusçuk) and Silistra (Silistre) were also other notable demonstrations of this new demographic reality of Bulgaria after the Ottoman conquest. The Ottoman conquests and the mass migration of Turks created a new structure in settlement in Bulgaria in which the Turkish population was concentrated in strategically valuable provinces and urban centers whereas the Bulgarians moved to the outskirts and rural peripheries. According to Halil İnalcık, the Bulgarian population was concentrated around the mountainous regions, and the

Bulgarian settlements were generally composed of small villages and towns rather than cities during the reign of the Ottoman Empire.[5] Such a choice of settlement strategy was also shaped by the Bulgarian concerns over security. To sum up, the overall demographic composition of Bulgaria provided an advantageous position for the Turks in certain parts of Bulgaria not only in numbers, but it also created a new urban reality which provided a ground for the further Ottoman strategic goals and facilitated the establishment of a Turkish hegemony in the region.

CHAPTER I: STATUS OF THE TURKISH MINORITY IN INDEPENDENT BULGARIA AND THE FIRST MIGRATIONS

The advantageous demographic trend of Turks in Bulgaria continued until the last quarter of the 19th century. According to Kemal Karpat, from the late 16th century to the mid-19th century, we can talk of a demographic superiority in numbers of the Turks in the former Bulgarian territories compared to the other ethnic groups.[6] During the 19th century, several revolts against the Ottoman Empire in Bulgaria took place; additionally, banditry increased markedly owing to the spread of nationalist ideas among Bulgarians. Furthermore, the increasing commercial and manufacturing activities led Bulgarians to migrate to cities and big towns, while some Turks decided to leave their homes out of fears revolving around security issues.[7]Although the destabilization of the region resulted in some population movements, especially among the Turks and other Muslim subjects of the empire, the turning point was the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-78. The war initiated a mass migration among the Turks towards the Anatolian interior due to the massacres committed against the Turks. It is estimated that before the war, about a third of the population of Bulgaria and Eastern Rumelia were ethnic Turks. Nevertheless, the worst was yet to come for the Turks as the devastating loss of the Ottoman forces marked the end of the total Turkish hegemony in the region. According to the Treaty of Berlin signed in 1878, the establishment of an autonomous Bulgarian principality was to be recognized by the Ottoman Empire. The establishment of Bulgaria as a separate yet autonomous entity led to a decline in the Turkish population, as some Turks were either dissatisfied or worried about living under Bulgarian rule. Between 1886 and 1890, 74,735 Turks left Bulgaria. According to Bulgarian documents, 70,603 Turks migrated to Turkey between 1893 and 1902. The flow of Turkish immigrants intensified even further following the Balkan Wars.[8] The 1900 census in Bulgaria confirms these statistics and the radical decline in the Turkish population. There was a steady stream of emigration and by 1900 the Turkish element, as measured by mother-tongue, had declined from about 33 percent in 1875 to 14 percent of the total population.[9] In light of these statistics, we can see the extent of the decline in the Turkish population in Bulgaria even before the establishment of an independent Bulgarian nation-state. This drastic change happened not only because of the outmigration of Turks from Bulgaria, but also because the massacres and forced displacements contributed to this radical decline. However, it is stated that Turks were still the dominant ethnic group in certain regions and cities in Bulgaria, such as Varna and Ruse. Bulgarians consisted of the majority only in the cities of Sofia, Tarnovo, and Vidin. [10] It can be said that, despite such a drastic decline in the Turkish population in

Bulgaria, Turks remained predominant in certain regions and cities and still had a remarkable presence in Bulgarian territories.

Following the establishment of the Bulgarian nation state in 1908, the Bulgarian government immediately started to implement some policies to westernize and modernize Bulgaria by following the Western-European nation state pattern. While doing so, Islamic elements in Bulgaria were exposed to systematic destruction, replacement, and negligence in some cases to erase the Islamic and Turkish-Ottoman legacy in Bulgaria. [11] Thus, even though it is argued that the living conditions of the Turks in Bulgaria were not drastically affected by these policies, the cultural and social legacies of the Turks in Bulgaria were tried to be reduced to nothing. Moreover, the Bulgarian state made it clear that any element of Turkish-Islamic culture and historical legacy was regarded as alien from that point forward; thus, few, if any, Turks in Bulgaria believed in the possibility of their social, political, and cultural integration into the Bulgarian state. Despite being a constitutional monarchy, the Bulgarian parliament (Narodno Sabraine) was hardly democratic, and the political representation of the non-Bulgarian elements was quite limited. The political participation of the Turks in Bulgaria was problematic, as they had neither political parties nor a significant number of representatives in parliament. In the consecutive elections that were held in the 1920s and 1930s, Turks were underrepresented relative to their proportion in the overall population in the Bulgarian parliament (only 9 Turkish deputies out of 246 deputies in 1920, 10 in 1923, 5 in 1925, 4 in 1933).[12] Moreover, the material conditions of the Turks in Bulgaria were no better. The chances of a promising improvement looked slim. Many of the Turks in Bulgaria were living humble lives as farmers or modest town dwellers.[13] In the early 20th century, the Balkan nations regarded the issue of ethnic minorities as a threat to their home countries, and negotiations were undertaken between the respective sides to eliminate this problem. Thus, some countries concluded that they needed population exchange and should facilitate the migration of minority groups to their kin state. As a result, in 1925, Turkish and Bulgarian states decided to mutually respect the respective minority groups rights of each other, and they agreed upon allowing the members of these minority communities to migrate to their homeland without any hindrances.[14] Because of the Turkish-Bulgarian Residence Agreement signed in 1925, there was a steady trend of migration of Turks from Bulgaria to Turkey until 1939.

Year	Number of Immigrants
1923-1933	101.507
1934	8.652
1935	23.968

1936	11.730
1937	13.490
1938	20.542
1939	17.769
Total	198.688

Table1. Turkish Emigration from Bulgaria to Turkey (1923–1939)

(Talip Küçükcan, Re-claiming Identity: Ethnicity, Religion and Politics among Turkish-Muslims in Bulgaria and Greece, Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs 19, no. 1 (1999):54.)[15] As it is shown in the table above, Turkish emigration from Bulgaria to Turkey reached nearly 200,000 people between 1923 and 1939, which means that a remarkable portion of the Turkish population in Bulgaria left the country. However, this trend came to a halt during World War II with only 14,390 Turkish migrants.[16] And this agreement was suspended as the Bulgarian nationalist government was overthrown by a communist regime in 1944. Yet, it is safe to say that until 1944, Turkish migration to Turkey was largely well-managed and relatively safe. Nonetheless, the Turkish population in Bulgaria was severely affected by this migration.

CHAPTER II: STATUS OF THE TURKISH MINORITY UNDER THE COMMUNIST REGIME OF BULGARIA AND ASSIMILATION POLICIES

When it comes to Bulgaria's communist era after World War II, we can speak of some ideological changes in Bulgarian policies toward the Turkish minority. Yet the continuous negative trend in outmigration among Turks in Bulgaria remained unchanged, as the general attitude of Bulgarians towards the Turkish minority did not change. One striking difference in the communist Bulgarian view of the Turks in Bulgaria was that the communist regimes perspective of the Turkish minority depended on the ethnicity rather than religion, unlike the attitude of the previous government.[17] Therefore, the communist party in Bulgaria thought of creating a socialist Turkish minority free of the religious elements, just like what they envisaged for the Bulgarians. Furthermore, believing that it would solve the ethnic stratification in Bulgaria, the communist party in Bulgaria initiated a massive campaign to encourage the Turks to join the party. However, despite all the efforts, Turks in Bulgaria showed hardly any willingness to become a part of the party. Approximately only 5 percent of the party members were ethnic Turks, which is well below their population in the country.[18] Like the Bulgarian nation state (between 1878 and 1945), the communist era in Bulgaria did not put an end to anti-Turkish policies

and migration of Turks. In the very first years of communist Bulgaria, we can observe a drastic change in the number of Turks in Bulgaria compared with pre-WW2 numbers. The census dated to December 1946 indicates that there were 656,025 Turks in Bulgaria out of 7,613,709 of the total population (making up approximately %8.6 of the total population).[19] The first wave of migration happened right after the establishment of a communist regime in Bulgaria, as the communist government implemented some policies that acutely undermined the material conditions of the Turkish minority. Policies such as forced labor, nationalization of the Turkish schools, and the increased taxation caused profound social and political disruption among the Turkish minority.[20] Next but not least, the communist regime targeted the Turkish landowners regardless of the proportion of the land they hold. The collectivization of the lands, especially in the northeastern part of Bulgaria, led to civil unrest among the Turks; thus, some landowner Turks, along with the other Turkish civil rioters, were subjected to forced migration to Turkey.[21] Therefore, the demographic presence of Turks in Bulgaria was undermined once more in 1950-51 because of the expulsion of 155.000 Turks. The reason behind this move was the Bulgarian communist governments desire to continue the collectivization policy. Some argue that behind this mass expulsion, there were some international political reasons. It is argued that this decision also stemmed from the ideological contestation between Turkey and Bulgaria after the confirmation of a Turkish military detachment to Korea, as well as it was perpetuated by the Turkish minoritys reluctance to give up on their religious and nationalist identities in favor of the Bulgarian government.[22][23] Between 1965 and 1975, the demographic surveys in Bulgaria kept the country's ethnic composition classified in accordance with the communist regimes demands. Which was triggered by the fears concerning the possible ethnic stratification of the Bulgarian society, might take place only if, as the Bulgarian government believed, the Turkish minority gains national consciousness based on the demographic surveys. Nevertheless, the numbers, which are given below, were made publicly available after Bulgaria transitioned to democracy.

Table2. Ethnic Composition of the Bulgarian Population (1965/1975)

Ethnic Group	1965	1975
Bulgarian	7.231.243	7.930.024
Turkish	780.928	730.728
Others	215.867	67.019
Total Number	8.227.966	8.727.771

(**Note:** Minor ethnic groups are aggregated under Others for clarity.)

(Bülent Yıldırım, Bulgaristanda Türk Varlığı ve Nüfusu (Bulgar İstatistik Kurumunun Verilerine Göre 1880–2011), 2. bs. (İstanbul: İlgi Kültür Sanat Yayınları, 2020)[24]

However, it is argued that the number of Turks in Bulgaria for the years 1965 and 1975 is quite controversial after a review of the official documents, which either date to this exact decade or the documents that were produced later.[25] Although the exact numbers remain uncertain, the estimates are relatively close, allowing us to provide an overall approximation. According to Barbara Jelavich, in 1965, the Turkish minority in Bulgaria was around 750.000 people.[26] However, it is safe to say that, following the mass expulsion in 1950-51, the 1960s witnessed relatively less population decline among the Turks in Bulgaria, especially considering the de facto suspension of migration to Turkey between 1952 and 1968. In 1969, after rigorous negotiations between the Turkish and Bulgarian governments, the two governments agreed to allow some Turkish people from Bulgaria to migrate to Turkey. The agreement was specifically designed for people whose relatives had recently migrated to Turkey. Although the first years after the agreement was signed witnessed relatively low numbers in immigration, the total number of immigrants was around 130.000 people until the expiration of the agreement in 1978.[27]

Table3. Turkish Emigration from Bulgaria to Turkey (1969–1973)

Year	Number of Immigrants
1969	2.529
1970	11.010
1971	9.540
1972	10.465
1973	3.283
Total Number	36,827

(Alexandre Popovic, The Turks of Bulgaria (1878 □□□□□□ Central Asian Survey 5, no. 2 (1986)[28]

Starting in the late 1970s, the Bulgarian government implemented a precise policy of assimilation against Bulgaria's Turkish minority, which intensified in the 1980s. In the winter of 1984, a campaign known as the National Revival Process started. This process was initiated to create a homogeneous Bulgarian society and eliminate the alien elements within it. The Bulgarian government closed Turkish newspapers and banned Turkish radio broadcasts and went as far as declaring that speaking Turkish in public is unlawful.[29]

The situation for Turkish schools was no better, as most of them were closed by the government. Also, the history books used in public education were revised, and the chapters related to the Turkish presence in Bulgaria and the history of the Turks were removed.[30] Nevertheless, the worst was yet to come as the Bulgarian government demanded that Turks change their names to Slavic ones, and they carried out this policy by claiming that the Turks in Bulgaria were converted Muslims after the Ottoman conquest of Bulgaria; therefore, they were not ethnically Turks in the first place.[31] In other words, despite viewing the Turkish minority as an ethno-religious minority for a long time, the Bulgarian government changed its policies completely to deny the existence of such a group to begin with. The revival process was supported by the fears revolving around the ethnic composition of the Turks in Bulgaria, who make up nearly %10 percent of the overall population of the country, despite all the outmigration that has happened in the last 100 years. And the fact that this population was concentrated in certain regions led some worries over a possible demand for autonomy by Turks among the Bulgarian bureaucratic and military circles.[32] The two aforementioned reasons, along with the discrepancy in birth rates between Turks and Bulgarians, which favors Turks, fueled concerns about a possible ethnic replacement among Bulgarians. At this point, it should be remembered that aside from the fact that the Bulgarians always viewed Turks in Bulgaria as members of their kinstate, Turkey, they also believed that Turkey was more than eager to use this for political and military purposes.[33] From the perspective of the Bulgarian government, such domestic problems make a country vulnerable, especially given that both countries have a poor record of getting along with each other in political matters. For the government, these fears had a valid point as the Turkish military intervention in Cyprus happened due to the presence of a Turkish minority and political commotion related to the ethnic conflicts in the island.[34] So, the assimilation of the Turkish minority was a necessary move for the Bulgarian government as the Turkish presence in Bulgaria threatens the national integrity of Bulgaria by giving a ground for the Turkish political and military intervention.

The assimilation policies triggered mass revolts among the Turks in the country. The protests were tried to be subdued with the intervention of the Bulgarian army and the arrest of leading figures of the Turkish minority, along with many others. Many of these prisoners were sent to the Belene camp, located between Bulgaria and Romania on one of the Danube's small branches. The protests led the Bulgarian government to take severe measures, such as declaring martial law in Turkish-inhabited regions, including the northeastern part of Bulgaria. Zhivkov made a statement on TV in 1985 (after the name change campaign finished) and declared, There are no Turks in Bulgaria.[35] And by this statement, Zhivkov put an end to the hopeful claims of some Bulgarian socialists who believed that socialist principles would somehow turn the Turkish minority into allies of the Communist Party despite their ethno-religious differences. And it became obvious that the party's leadership actively rejected the idea that Turks have to give up their identities if they ever want to be part of Bulgarian society and state. Despite increasing international pressure on Bulgaria, the Bulgarian government claimed that the name-change policy was a voluntary movement initiated by ethnic Bulgarians who had recently rediscovered their identities. However, in 1989 Zhivkov changed plans and decided to get rid of the Turkish minority rather than trying to assimilate them, as it turns out the

assimilation policies backfired, and the whole commotion started to undermine the domestic order and international prestige of Bulgaria. In a T.V. address by Zhivkov himself, he asserted that Turks ☀□□□ infidel to the Bulgarian state and should leave forever.[36] Following this, the Bulgarian government issued passports for Turks who wanted to leave Bulgaria. In the summer of 1989, the last big, forced mass migration took place.

Table4. Turkish Immigration from Bulgaria to Turkey (1877-1993)

Migration Period	The Number of Immigrants
1877-1891	767.339
1893-1902	70.606
1912-1913	200.000
1923-1949	213.618
1950-1951	154.393
1969-1978	130.000
1989-1993	354.902
Total	1.736.465

(Bülent Yıldırım, Bulgaristanda Türk Varlığı ve Nüfusu (Bulgar İstatistik Kurumunun Verilerine Göre 1880–2011), 2. bs. (İstanbul: İlgi Kültür Sanat Yayınları, 2020)[37]

As can be observed in the table above, Turkish migration between 1989 and 1993 totals around 350,000 people. And this number was unprecedented since Bulgaria's independence. And such a large number of immigrants led to a refugee crisis between Turkey and Bulgaria, as well as attracting the attention of international organizations. For the Bulgarian government, it was a voluntary migration of Turks from Bulgaria to Turkey. Yet the Bulgarian government took measures to ensure that Turks would not return to Bulgaria. The immigrants were subjected to fines and deprivation of citizenship rights in Bulgaria in case they ever returned to their homes.[38] Immigration of the Turks also means that Bulgaria would get rid of the problem of providing subsistence and paying wages to a remarkable portion of the population. At this point, it should be noted that the living standards in Bulgaria started declining in the 1980s, and a negative trend was to be followed in the upcoming years.[39] This provides an economic explanation for the forced

expulsion, although it was not the Bulgarian government's primary concern regarding the Turkish minority. Furthermore, the expropriation of the Turkish minority's property was implemented to reduce the very slim chance of Turks returning to Bulgaria, as well as to create a quick source of revenue to address the worsening economic situation. Till this day, many Bulgarians from the intellectual circles view the National Revival Process as a source of humanitarian tragedy.[40]

CHAPTER III: CONTEMPORARY DEMOGRAPHIC ISSUES IN BULGARIA AND THE STRATEGIC VALUE OF THE TURKISH MINORITY

The fall of the socialist government and Bulgaria's transition from communism to democracy in the 1990s marked a critical decade for Bulgarian society. Mass migration, corruption, high unemployment, and skyrocketing inflation defined these years.[41] This turmoil led to significant socio-economic transformations, as evidenced by changes in fertility rates; thus, the demographic crisis has become a hot topic in Bulgaria in recent years. The radical fall in fertility rates and aging are not exceptional problems for Bulgaria in the region, yet Bulgaria is one of the worst cases among other countries. Bulgarias demographic crisis has deepened over time, as the population has consistently declined for more than three decades. The country continues to have one of the lowest life expectancies in the EU, with a deepening gap between younger and older generations. These trends are further intensified by the persistent and rising emigration of economically active segments of the population. One of the main factors in the decline in fertility rates is the rapid urbanization of Bulgaria following the establishment of a socialist regime. Pre □□□□□ War II statistics indicate that approximately 80% of Bulgarian society was rural, whereas only 20% was urban.[42] These statistics are supported by many historians, who prefer to call Bulgarians a peasant nation. However, the socialist policies of mass collectivization and rapid industrialization resulted in a mass exodus from the countryside to the new urban sites. The concept of disappearance of the peasantry, while not being exceptional to Bulgaria, dropped the Bulgarian rural population to %32.[43] However, it was the Bulgarian who was affected the most by the disappearance of the peasantry. Many ethnic Bulgarians tended to leave their homes in the pursuit of jobs in service industry and blue-collar positions in the industrial sites, whereas the Turks remained to be agricultural workers in the rural areas. At this point, it should be noted that the Turkish population in the urban areas was already suffering from a radical decline in numbers since the establishment of independent Bulgaria, while the Bulgarian population gradually became more concentrated in the urban sites. It is recorded the Turks made up %11 of the urban population in 1900, while it was only %3 in 1956.[44] Such a socio-economic trend was deemed positive by the Bulgarian authorities as it benefitted the urban population the most, the majority of whom are ethnic Bulgarians. [45] However, the shortcomings of such ethnic stratification in the division of rural and urban populations as well as the occupational tendencies were to be felt strongly in the upcoming decades. Food shortages in the urban sites, overworking and industrialization-driven health problems, exacerbated by the unnatural living conditions, became common causes of the dropping fertility rates and increasing mortality rates in ethnic Bulgarians.

Whereas the Turks in the rural areas could maintain a healthy diet in an industry-free environment.[46] As a result, fertility rates in ethnic Turks showed a gradual increase over time. The average number of children in Muslim Turkish families rose from 2 to 3 between 1940 and 1960, and continued this upward trend, reaching 6 by 1985. This trend was supported by the decreasing number of marriage age in Turks.[47] While the Turkish fertility rates was increasing rapidly the Bulgarian numbers were away from maintaining a healthy replacement rate of 2.1 children per woman. Moreover, when we refer to the statistics it is not only proven that the strong pronatalist approach of the socialist government in Bulgaria which encouraged family formation at young age and proposed a two-child family model has worsened over time following the fall of the socialist regime, but it also shows that prohibition of abortions, modern contraception and lower tolerance for divorces fell short as the trend shows a strong presence among the women born in the 1960s and 1970s.[48]Also, Bulgarias demographic problem reveals a clear ethnic stratification among the countrys three main groups: Bulgarians, Turks, and Roma. The statistics show that the urban and educated women tend to have less children or even practice a childlessness lifestyle in Bulgaria, which is a prevalent trend among ethnic Bulgarians in the recent years.[49] The situation in the 21st century was not any better for ethnic Bulgarians. A population census report in 2011 shows that the fertility rate in ethnic Bulgarian women was only 1.1 while it was 2.3 for the Turks in Bulgaria.[50] The census once more proves that the catastrophic numbers the ethnic Bulgarians have been dealing with regarding fertility rates.

Table.5 Turkish Population in Bulgaria (1900-1992)

Year	Total Population	Turks	Turks as % of Total
1900	3.744.283	531.240	14.2
1905	4.035.575	488.010	12.1
1910	4.337.513	465.641	10.8
1920	4.846.954	520.339	10.7
1926	5.478.740	557.552	10.5
1934	6.077.939	591.193	9.7
1946	7.029.349	675.500	9.6
1956	7.613.709	656.026	8.6

1965	8.227.046	780.928	9.5
1975	8.727.771	N/S	N/S
1985	8.948.649	N/S	N/S
1992	8.472.724	822.253	9.7

(N/S=Not stated) (Ali Eminov, The Turks in Bulgaria: Post-1989 Developments, Nationalities Papers 28, no. 1 (1999))[51]

As can be observed in the table above, the Turkish minority in Bulgaria has always succeeded in keeping a share of %8-10 percent of the total population despite mass migrations, wars, massacres, and assimilation policies. This clearly proves that the Turkish minority in Bulgaria had higher fertility rates in comparison to the Bulgarians. However, this does not mean that Turks in Bulgaria are not vulnerable to suffering from this demographic crisis as well, just because their fertility rates are slightly above the replacement level of 2.1. Furthermore, the estimates of Bulgaria's population do not look promising. Bulgarias population is expected to keep declining without interruption through 2060, according to the projections of the National Statistical Institute. Likewise, Bulgaria has been ranked as the country with the highest pace of population loss among all EU countries.[52] This projection clearly shows that Bulgaria has been struggling with a severe demographic crisis, and the likelihood of things getting worse is notably high.

In this respect, we have to talk about some problems that such countries with severe demographic challenges have encountered or will eventually encounter. Demographic crisis is a comprehensive issue that not only manifests itself in the lack of labor force, but it also shows itself in the low enrolment rates in primary and college education.[53] For instance, the low number of students in primary and high schools might result in reduced educational funding, ultimately decreasing the quality of education and the importance placed on education by both parents and children. This will certainly decrease both the quantity and quality of the service industry in the base country in the coming years. The lack of educated people will not only place a much greater burden on the remaining labor force but also endanger the maintenance of certain sectors, ranging from the education and health industries to governmental affairs. Also, the lack of a young generation to come to replace the ageing population poses a great danger for the maintenance of the social care and the pension systems.[54] Which might lead governors to increase the threshold age of retirement. And such a policy will put a burden on the young members of the labour force to work more than the previous generations to earn their rights of retirement as well as it might be expected of the government to increase the daily worktime so that they can deal with the economic burden of the heavy loaded social care system. In 2022, it is noted that the individuals aged more than 60 accounted for %23 of the total population in Bulgaria.[55]Again, such a burden will surely affect the economic stability of the country as it demotivates younger generations to seek employment or

receive higher education in Bulgaria. According to the national statistics, for 100 retirees only 62 new workers enter the labour force in Bulgaria which is a nation-wide trend in every province.[56]

Next but not least as the proportion of the older generations hold a remarkable portion of the population the political parties will likely turn their attention to the older generations and design the national policies in accordance with the older generations desires and needs.[57] Such a political environment is likely to discourage younger generations from participating in politics and may also foster generational conflict within Bulgarian society. All the problems that are listed above have contributed to outmigration among the Bulgarian citizens, by discouraging younger Bulgarian citizens regardless of their ethno-religious affiliations to stay in Bulgaria. Moreover, the very same problems discourage younger Bulgarian generations from having children. According to a survey done in 2023 that half of the Bulgarians aged between 18-35 expressed a desire to delay having children indefinitely.[58] Which reveals that the negative trend in the fertility rates have little to none chance of getting better in the long run. Furthermore, it is given that the number of women in the productive ages decreased by 200.000 in Bulgaria between 2010 and 2020, which is exacerbated by the fact that Bulgaria was ranked among the top countries within the highest ratio of abortions to the number of births.[59] Which contributes greatly to the demographic crisis of Bulgaria along with the poor fertility rates. Bulgarian intellectual circles also notes that the migration is as big threating as the low fertility rates for the Bulgarian demography. Despite the fact that the low fertility rates are regarded to be the leading factor in the demographic crisis, Bulgarian outmigration contributed greatly to the intensification of the problem as the number of immigrants exceed one million in the period between 1990 and 2005.[60] Despite the reasons and the destinations may vary, the outmigration hurts the demographic trend of Bulgaria as much as it undermines both the quantity and the quality of the labour force. It is stated that between 2010 and 2020, roughly a total number of 175.000 Bulgarian citizens left the country. And the major destinations for these immigrants were ranked as Germany, Russia and Turkey in order.[61] Even though the migrations to Germany and Russia could be associated with economy-driven factors, it is safe to assume that the migrations to Turkey might be driven by cultural reasons; therefore, it could be said that the ethnic Turkish migration from Bulgaria might be concentrated on Turkey.

Policy Recommendation:

The European Union integration process certainly played a key role in Bulgaria's transition to democracy. However, some circles still argue that the Bulgarian government refrained from making some radical structural changes and instead they resorted to some eye-polishing superficial amendments that would not hurt the Bulgarian nationalist agenda.[62] Even though certain non-territorial cultural rights were granted to the minority groups in Bulgaria, some believe that the social, political, and economic integration of the minority groups in Bulgaria is still lacking. And the Bulgarian constitution is telling in that manner as it proves that the nationalist mode of thinking among the Bulgarian governors did not change much. It is said that the Bulgarian constitution is one of the most illiberal

ones in the Balkans. While the constitution does not recognize the existence of minority groups in Bulgaria, it also specifically targets and prevents any possible political formation of the minority groups by stating that there shall be no political parties on ethnic, racial, or religious lines.[63] This demonstrates how restricted the political participation and representation of minority groups are in the Bulgarian parliament. However, despite all bureaucratic obstacles and nationalist prejudice, a Turkish minority political party known as the Movement of Rights and Freedoms Party (HÖH) has succeeded in playing a vital role in the Bulgarian parliament. It has secured solid political support not only from the Turkish minority but also from the Pomak and Roma communities since its establishment in 1990. Even though the nationalist circles in Bulgaria often condemn the existence of such a party and assert that MRF will later be used as a ground for the separatist claims by the minority groups, the party refrains from creating such incitements.[64] For this paper we will not go into detail regarding the political record of MRF, yet we will talk about how the organization MRF and the Turkish minority can be used as an asset to reverse or at least slow down the negative demographic trends in Bulgaria. As a political party, MRF has close ties with Turkey, Turkish civil society, and public institutions. Furthermore, MRF carries a vision of achieving solidarity among all Turkic countries within a broader cultural context even though the primary motivation of the party remains within the borders of the Balkans, particularly concerning the Balkan Turks.[65] Yet, through the initiatives of MRF, the Bulgarian government can also establish stronger connections not only with Turkey but also with the other Turkic countries. Despite being accused of prioritizing Turkey rather than Bulgaria by the Bulgarian nationalist circles, MRF has been accepted as a coalition partner in the Bulgarian government between 2001-2009 without an interruption.[66] This shows that MRF is recognized as a legitimate actor in Bulgarian politics and as part of Bulgarian society. In other words, MRF can serve as a bridge to establish bilateral relations and to develop joint cultural policies between the respective countries. Such connections might be used to preserve the cultural legacy of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria. For instance, the mass expulsion of the Turkish minority in 1989 resulted in the loss of a remarkable portion of the ethnically Turkish skilled labor force in Bulgaria. Aside from all the other professions the loss of teachers and scholars specifically rendered the Turkish minoritys opportunities to receive education in Turkish as well as it undermined the cultural connections of the Turkish minority with Turkey.[67] Therefore, the situation for the Turkish classes does not seem to be getting any better in the long run as both the quality and the quantity of the instructors remain poor in Bulgaria. Moreover, it is said that the fundings for the Turkish classes in public schools remain insufficient especially in the provinces with relatively low number of ethnic Turkish students which is a problem exacerbated by the rigorous procedures that complicates the access to Turkish classes in public schools.[68] As such procedures and the lack of fundings discourage Turkish families to demand Turkish classes for their children, many families show reluctance to insist on this issue. This attitude is also supported by the idea that the Turkish families believe that the daily use of Turkish in public life would be enough for their children to learn Turkish, yet the Turkish instructors observed that the daily use of Turkish fall short for a comprehensive learning process for Turkish.[69]

Table6. The Number of Students in Elective Turkish Classes in Bulgaria

Academic Year	1994-1995	1998-1999	2008-2009	2015-2016	2016-2017	2017-2018
The Number of Students in Turkish Classes	54.042	40.000	8.307	7.484	7.086	5.835

(Hüseyin Alptekin, İdlir Lika, Merve Dilek Dağdelen ve Viktorya Erdoğu, Bulgaristan Türklerinin Kültürel, Ekonomik ve Siyasi Sorunları, Talepleri, Çözüm Önerileri (Ankara: SETA, 2020)[70]

As can be observed in the table above, demand for the Turkish classes seems to be getting lower in each new academic year, which clearly demonstrates the negative effects of the aforementioned problems regarding the Turkish classes. In that respect, joint cultural conferences and a common funding pool for the preservation of the cultural heritage of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria can be established. Likewise, civil society and cultural associations for ethnic Bulgarians in Turkey can be strengthened to preserve the Bulgarian language and culture. By doing so, it is possible to decrease the prospect of migration of Turks in Bulgaria that stems from identity issues and a lack of commitment towards Bulgaria due to the weak social and cultural integration and the poor implementation of the minority cultural rights. Fewer immigrants from the Turkish minority in Bulgaria will mean fewer labor shortages, fewer shortages of educated people, and lower fertility rates. In a sense, preventing Turkish outmigration from Bulgaria may lessen the effects of Bulgaria's catastrophic demographic crisis.

CONCLUSION

Historically, from 1878 to the 1990s, Bulgarian authorities have always tried to reduce and assimilate the Turkish minority in Bulgaria through a series of assimilation policies and forced migrations to Turkey, along with the constitutionally supported ethnic discrimination. Such policies were motivated by fears surrounding security issues and the lack of a homogeneous Bulgarian society from the perspective of the Bulgarian authorities, which is why, for more than a century, the Turkish minority has been subjected to such policies. However, policies aimed at ethnic homogenization weakened Bulgarias demographic structure over the long term. Since the fertility rates of the Turkish minority are higher than the Bulgarian ones, the loss of Turkish people due to migration resulted in a sharp decline in the overall population and in a radical decline in the total fertility rates as well. In that respect, the social and cultural integration of the Turkish minority, which is still lacking in many respects and is even argued to be prevented by the authorities, could be improved through the implementation of joint cultural policies that benefit both sides. By doing so, commitment and the willingness of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria might be improved, which may slow the negative demographic trend by encouraging ethnic Turks to stay in Bulgaria and contribute to Bulgarian society.

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